

THEME OF FEMINISM IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S NOVELS WITH REFERENCE

TO -“THE DARK HOLDS NO TERROR”

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande has many avatars. At Intellectual discussions, she champions the cause of English as an India language, and fights for the recognition of woman as individual. She speaks truth gently but firmly, her words lingering, long after her exit. The present paper projects the fact tale about women, who speaking for herself or for the whole of womankind is quite different from a man telling a women's tale also it brings out of the idea of women explicating her and emerging out of the cocoon of self petty to spread her wings of self-confidence.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, Protagonist, Quest, Female Identity, Feminine Sensibility

INTRODUCTION

The term *feminism* is by no means a monolithic term. If one seeks a common strand in a number of its varieties, it is the critique of the patriarchal modes of thinking which subordinate women to men in familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal and artistic domains. This patriarchal ideology teaches women to internalize these concepts in the process of their socialization. It brings to focus the concepts of gender which are man –made.¹ Undoubtedly the world looks at women and their role as defined by society which characterizes her as ideally warm, gentle, dependent and submissive. Most of the religions of the world assert that woman should be subordinate to and dependent on men. Hunter college Women's studies collective quota Manu: “*Day and night woman must be kept in subordination to the males of the family*”:

In childhood to the father, in youth to her husband, in old he to her sons.....even though

*the husband be destitute of virtue, and seeks pleasure elsewhere, he must be worshipped as God*².

The Hindu philosophy the *Vedas*, *The Bhagwad Gita*, *The Digambara Jains*, *the Christians* and *the Muslims* have the same views regarding the position of woman in the society. All of them thrust upon women strict rules of discipline and prohibit her from the rights equals to man. Her position in the family has been that of a servile creature, a toy and an object of lust and pleasure. Commenting on the position of the woman in India's male- dominated society, Shantha Krishnaswamy writes:

*“she is a creature who, as a child , is sold off to a stranger for a bridal price, or when she grows up, serves as a supplier of dowry for her husband's family , or who as a widow, in a final act of obliteration immolates herself on her husband's funeral pyre to be acclaimed as 'Sati-Savitri' as an immortal”*³

Through her novels, Shashi Deshpande has performed her role as a protagonist of the oppressed woman. She feels that a woman, not only in India but also in other countries, is not treated at par with man in any sphere of human activity. She has been since post-Aryan age, oppressed, suppressed and marginalized in the matters of sharing the available opportunity for fulfillment of her life. Deshpande is grimly aware of plight and the predicament of Indian woman. A careful study of her novels evinces that her women protagonists have been drawn from the middle- class society. Most of them are sensitive, intelligent, educated and career oriented. Their pain and torture have been highlighted through the roles of the women protagonist—Indu, Saru, Jaya, Urmila and Sumi – who find themselves trapped in the roles assigned to them by the society. They have been portrayed as struggling against social taboos and attempting to assert their individuality.

Deshpande refers to the myths, epics, puranas as well as other holy books in which women, even though innocent, have been presented as the embodiments of pativrata – obeying male persons and submitting to their wishes. She says:

*“all the women in the myths have been created by men to fulfill their various needs. There is eternal child to be protected and controlled, the self-sacrificing mother to the nurture and cherish the best partner to guarantee exclusive rites of the man over her body as well as an undoubted paternity of children and the temptress to titillate and provide sexual gratification. And finally, the goddess to provide morality. What place does a real thinking? feeling woman have in this agenda? Women were bound to have these doubts”.*⁴

Shashi Deshpande has taken to writing very significant novels in terms of women's fiction. But her approach to feminism is positive. Whereas her short fiction presents lyric awareness, her novels presents sustained explorations. These themes – frustrations, guilt, loss and loneliness have been treated, disguised and highlighted on a larger scale in her novels. Obviously, they emerge as feminist discourses. An analytic and detailed study of her novels provides a record of various types of dimensions of crudities and injustice inflicted on middle class educated women in Indian society.

ANALYSIS OF THEME OF SHASHI DESHPANDE'S NOVELS

Shashi Deshpande's novels *The Dark Holds No Terrors*(1980), deals with an unusual character, Sarita , who dares to challenge the age-old traditions to marry a man of outside her caste. *“The love marriage between Sarita and Manu, doesn't prove to be fruitful”*. The note from the author indicated that the novel has been written with a specific propose. She says:

*“All authors, like most parents, have their favorite children; but unlike parents, author can without any compunction, declare their partiality. The Dark Holds No Terror is, of all my novel~ the one dearest to me. Perhaps it is because it is the one that came closest to the visions I had of it when I conceived it. Perhaps, it is because it was this book that gave me the never-to-be experienced – again acceptance”*⁵

The protagonist of the novel Sarita, known as Saru, is an educated and professional woman. But still she yearns for her identities which the male ego refuses to accept and subjects her to sexual sadism because of her superior social and economic status. Since her childhood she has been a rebel against traditional norms. After the death of her younger brother she defies her mother, goes to a city, studies to become a doctor and marries the man of her choice. When she is a successful doctor with two children, their marriage is on the verge of breakdown because of her husband begins to behave

with her cruelly. He, though a loving father and caring husband during the day, turns into a monster in bed abusing and bruising her. Every night he reduces her to the position of a slave.

"...It was a monstrous invasion of my body. I tried to move, twisting my body, wriggling under the weight that pinned it down. It was impossible. I was pinioned to a position of an abject surrender of myself".⁶

Saru's inability to protest the tortures inflicted on her compels her to go to her father's house after her mother's death. An analysis of Saru's Relationship with her parents, her husband and her brother as well as quest for a identity awaken her dormant strength in her. Several other events which have taken place in her life contribute to the shaping of her personality. In her childhood her upbringing was based on gender discrimination shown by her mother in favour of her brother, Dhruva. At every occasion – birthdays and other rituals- Dhruva was given preference. She recalls one such event of her childhood days and says:

"Birthdays were not then the tremendous occasions they are made out to be now:

but the excitement of having one , of being the centre of attraction never palled. It was always a fascinating thought....I was born. But of my birth, my mother had said to me once... "It rained heavily the day you were born. It was terrible". And somehow it seemed to me that it was my birth that was terrible for her, not the rains¹⁶⁹".⁷

The practice of giving preference to a male child has been a remarkable feature of Indian family. Here Deshpande refers to the importance given to the male child of certain occasion's viz. naming ceremony and birthday ceremony and more than these at the time of lighting parents pyre, P. Spartt says, "*The uncommonly intense desire for a son among Hindus is well recognized. It is traditionally attributed to the doctrine that unless his son performs the obsequiens, a man's soul cannot go to heaven*".

Deshpande also highlights the social evil of people's hankering to have a male child to inherit ancestral property, maintain the continuity of the family and to light the funeral pyre of his parents and grandparents. So the birth of a son is celebrated with singing and merry-making. It leads to a sense of joy and contentment and a feeling of being blessed. Recalling her parents in difference and lack of interest in her especially after Dhruva's death. Saru says:

"He (i.e. her father) never took any interest in my school or college. He left it all to her (i.e. his mother). And she never really cared. Not after Dhruva's death. I just didn't exist for her. I died long before I left home".⁸

The difference of treatment towards a male and female child is perceptible in the mother-daughter conversation.

Don't go out in the sun, you will get darker.

Who cares?

We have to care if you don't. We have to get you married.

I don't want to get married.

Will you live with us all your life?

Why not?

You can't.

And Dhruva?

*He's different. He's a boy(45)"*⁹

Giving her opinion on the mother – daughter relationship as portrayed by Shashi Deshpande's. Rani Dharkar remarks, "*The mother in the Dark Holds No Terrors is malignant and unforgiving, cursing her own daughter. Forgiving her even on her deathbed?"*"⁹

In the event of Dhruva's death the mother accuses Saru of killing Dhruva. She speaks out Saru's intentions and not the deed. We witness an extreme instance of the sibling jealousy provokes undoubtedly by the mother's favoritism. Dhruva's death utterly disappoints Saru's mother. She losses all interests in life. Saru's dream is mainly the representation of her feeling of guilt. As Premlila Paul observes,

*"she (Saru) has always felt an inner drive to make his the mythological Dhruva (push of the father's lap by the step brother) and Dhruva's death becomes a tantalizing "North star" controlling her happiness from afar. The guilt had come to stay and she is destined to be in the dock perennially".*¹⁰

Disgusted with the mother's biting comments Saru comes to Bombay for higher studies and her impressionable mind is attracted to the Manohar (called Manu),a popular fellow a student of the college , who is senior to her by a few years. His talents as a budding writer, a poet, an orator and an active member of the college Dramatic Society, charm Saru to develop love affair with him, and to marry him. On this affair Sarabjit K. Sandhu comments.

*"As she (Saru) always feels insecure in her parents' home, her marriage to Manu is a means of that love and security which she had always lacked in life. He is the ideal romantic hero who has come to rescue her from the insecure, loveless existence"*¹¹.

Deshpande makes her protagonist assert her personality through her decision to adopt medical profession and to marry at her own choice. Now she feels happy and liberated. She experiences a malicious pleasure in thus defying her mother's strict conservatism but years later when her marriage turns out to be a failure and is on the verge of a breakdown, she regrets her decision to have married Manu.

Deshpande attaches importance to material prosperity which can be extended by a professional wife like Saru. After giving up her job, she is no longer satisfied with her mediocre standard of living. She now begins to miss the small things that money can buy. She laments her middle class living saying:

*I had began to wonder at his acceptance of our shabby way of living. For me things now began to hurt.....a frayed sari I could no replace, a movie I could not see, an outing I could not join in. I knew now that without money life becomes petty and dreary. The thought of going on this way became unbearable.*¹²

Saru dreams of rising high in her professional carrier, and of earning money to set up a new life .Now she comes in contact with Boozie who is making an open display of his relationship with her with a view to hiding his homosexuality. But because of her feeling of contempt and loathing towards Manu, she makes no effort to clear any misconception in Manu's mind regarding the nature of her relationship with boozie. Her social and financial status grows far beyond that of her husband. She becomes a busy, a successful doctor while Manu lags behind as an underpaid lecturer. Saru's professional

success satisfies her ego and full fills her dreams of establishing herself as carrier woman but ruins her married life. The threadbare description of the situation exhibits Deshpande's deep understanding of medical field.

"Married to a practicing neuron pathologist, Shashi Deshpande presumably as intimate knowledge of the neurotic world of the likes of Manu. But she shows remarkable restraint in the depiction of these scenes and spares readers the clinical details"¹³.

Unable to bear Manu's sadistic onslaughts, Saru decides to seek refuge in her parental home after a long gap of fifteen years. Externally she makes a show of her intention to take care of her father, but actually she wants to escape the tortures inflicted on her every night by her husband. At her father's house she thinks over her familial problem seriously and tries to objectively analyze the cause for the failure of her marriage. She comes to the conclusion that Manu's male ego is responsible for the ruin of the family. She also blames herself that her ambition for power and progress totally ignored Manu's existence. A sense of guilt and shame prevails upon her. Then she feels guilty of having done injustice to her mother, brother, husband and children. She comments-

"My brother died because I heedlessly turned my back on him. My mother died alone because I deserted her. My husband is a failure because I destroyed his manhood" (p.217).

Saru's sense of guilt reaches its climax when she advises the college girl students to be submissive and obedient to their in-laws after marriage. To ensure a happy married life they should remain a step behind their husband. She says:

"A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he's an M.A., you should be a B.A... If he is 5' 4" tall, you shouldn't be more than 5'3" tall. If he's earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred ninety nine rupees. If you want a happy marriage Don't ever try to reverse the doctor-nurse, executive-secretary, principal- teacher. It can be traumatic, disastrous. And I assure you, it isn't worth it. He'll suffer, you will suffer and so will the children. Women's magazine will tell you that a marriage must be an equal partnership. That's nonsense; Rubbish. No partnership can ever be equal. It will always be unequal, but take care that it's unequal in favour of your husband. If the scale tilts in your favour, god helps you, both of you. (p.137)"

Through this episode Deshpande want to convey the message that in a traditional society, even an educated and professional woman cannot thrust her views on the whole men-women folk. A female person is fated to suffer the inequality based on the gender discrimination. The superiority of the male is considered to be an essential condition for the success of marriage. The concept can be very hardly replaced and uprooted as in Saru's case it is projected. She seeks happiness and joy in extra marital relationship with Padmakar Rao and Boozie but she abruptly withdraws from them and ends the relationship, as she finds no comfort in them. She says:

"Now, I knew it was not just the consequences I feared and hated, but she thinks it. What had I imagined? Love? Romance? Both, I knew too well, were illusions, and not relevant to my life any way (p.133)".

Kamini Dinesh agrees with Saru's response and comments on her relationship with other men,

"in the The Dark Hold No Terrors There are other men but the relationship gives no solace. On the other hand, the homosexual Boozie and the frustrated Padma bring to Saru the disillusioning realization that there can be no happiness or fulfillment in this relationship. There cannot be "escaped -route from the tension of the married life. The woman, seeking a crutch, has finally to fall back on herself".¹⁴

Thus the novelist shows certain amount of sympathy towards her. Saru's observations as a lady doctor and her submission to the orthodoxy underline her feminist leanings. Beside these stray references to the varying symptoms of feminine disease viz. backache, headache, leucorrhoea, menorhages, dysmenorrhea and loss of appetite etc. indicate Deshpande interest in the female world.

Saru's meeting with the Gitangali the wife of her husband's, friend her obvious desire to please every whim of her husband, readily changing her name to Anju (short for Gitanjali) after her marriage in keeping with the wishes of her husband, her friend Nalu's bitterness at such whims of male person, and her adopting spinsterhood evince the grievances of the Indian women. Saru's thinks that it would not be justified to assert that “.....she (*Nalu*) is bitter because she never married, never bore a child. But that would be as stupid as calling me fulfilled because I got married and I have borne two children”(121), Shashi Deshpande has tried to establish that devoid of mutual understanding neither married life nor unmarried life is happy. Lack of wisdom and mutual respect leads the family life to ruin and disaster.

Saru thinks herself very much to be a person. She infers that escape is ridiculous idea. Towards the close of the novel, we find Saru receiving a telegram and preparing herself to confront to her husband Manu. She realizes that there can be no refuse other than her own self. Thus, she frees herself from her fears and pains and confidently waits to face what used to be the greatest terror of her life, her husband. She gains confidence and learns to trust herself. “*All right so I am alone. But so's everyone else.....we have to go on trying. If we can't believe in ourselves we are sunk*”. Thus Saru does not feel defeated or doomed to suffer but is courage's enough to pick up the strands of her life and resolves to survive against all odds. She decides to assert herself.

CONCLUSIONS

Through her novels, Shashi Deshpande tries to depict feminine sensibility .In general life women like male counters want to liberation in all its approaches & recognition. They struggle for Equality for women rights historically & politically. They emphasis on the value of women in the society. Shashi Deshpande has presented in her novels modern Indian women's search for these definition about the self and society and the relationship that are central to women. Shashi Deshpande's novel deals with the theme of the quest for a female identity. The complexities of man-woman relationship especially in the context of marriage, the trauma of a disturbed adolescence. The Indian woman has for years been a silent sufferer. While she has played different roles-as a wife, mother, sister and daughter, she has never been able to claim her own individuality. Shashi Deshpande's novels deal with the women belonging to Indian middle class. She deals with the inner world of the Indian women in her novels. She portrays her heroines in a realistic manner.

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